

Sheila Hones,
Literary Geographies: Narrative Space in
Let the Great World Spin

(New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)

Hiroyuki Inoue

Although cultural geographers have been approaching literary texts with methods and theories developed within their discipline for a while, it is in recent years that spatiality has become one of the topics most frequently discussed by scholars of literature. This does not mean that literary critics were totally indifferent to geographical, topographical, or cartographic aspects of literary texts in the past, but it cannot be denied that critics have sometimes underestimated the significance of place and space in literature. In his influential book *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks claims, for example, that “[t]emporality is a problem, and an irreducible factor of any narrative statement, in a way that location is not.”¹⁾ Behind this statement is probably an assumption that space is just a stable container in which narrative events happen in the dynamic flow of time. But space cannot be dismissed as a static background of narrative. Critical trends within literary studies such as postcolonial studies and ecocriticism have dealt with the issues of space and place from their perspectives, but the growing scholarly interest in spatiality itself has led to the interdisciplinary collaboration between literary studies and other academic fields such as geography, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, architectural studies, and urban planning.

Written by one of the leading scholars in literary geography, Sheila Hones’s *Literary Geographies* is a book that will benefit both literary critics interested in spatiality and cultural geographers interested in literature. Hones’s twofold project is a very ambitious one. As she states at the beginning, the principal aim of the book is “to explore a collaborative and interdisciplinary approach to the narrative spatiality of a work of contemporary fiction through a combination of theory and method in literary studies with theory and method in cultural geography.”²⁾ In combining an analysis of a specific work of fiction, Colum McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin* (2009), with a theoretical exploration of the scope of literary geography, Hones’s project is somewhat similar to what Gérard Genette does in *Narrative Discourse*, now a classic work of narratology that grounds itself on a reading of Marcel Proust’s novel.³⁾

¹⁾ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 22.

²⁾ Hones, *Literary Geographies*, 3. Further page references will appear parenthetically in the text.

³⁾ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980).

Literary Geographies succeeds in both of these analytical and theoretical aspects.

The fundamental insight that supports Hones's literary geography is the view of the novel as "a spatial event" that unfolds "in the course of sociospatial and intertextual interactions" (11). The concept of event refuses to see literary texts as fixed, stable, or static entities; instead, they become something that happens, occurs, or takes place in time and space. This means that literary geography has to consider three different but interrelated types of space that are formed in and around McCann's novel: "the fictional space" generated within the text, which includes but is not limited to the story's locations; the "intertextual literary space" that emerges as a network connecting this particular novel and other texts; and "the sociospatial dimension of the collaboration of author, editor, publisher, critic, and reader" (8). These three types of spatiality are the intratextual, intertextual, and extratextual dimensions of literary geography. In the second introductory chapter, Hones traces the development of cultural geography's approach to literary works from its initial concentration on the author to its gradual shift of focus to the text itself and the agency of the reader. This development more or less parallels the one in literary studies from biographical criticism to textual criticism and then to reader-response criticism. She also reexamines the concepts of the author, the text, and the reader and shows that they are not stable or self-evident entities. They are revealed as amorphous agents participating in the network of interactive relationships that make it possible for the spatial event of the text to take place. Although these insights are relevant to all the subsequent chapters, they become most important in the extratextual analysis of the novel.

The rest of the book deals with the intratextual, intertextual, and extratextual aspects of *Let the Great World Spin*, the first of which is discussed in chapters three to six. McCann's narrative is primarily set in New York City, but the city also functions as a point of convergence for the fictional characters from many different parts of the world. The third chapter summarizes the plot of this complex novel, focusing on the individual locations that figure in the narrative. The next chapter begins by pointing out that the New York City in McCann's novel is not a direct reflection or representation of the single, actual New York. The city, Hones suggests, is constituted by the multiple layers of different New Yorks and has to be regarded as "a blend of fact and fiction, memory and projection, the verifiable and the imagined" (51). The author thus begins to move away from the conventional view of space in literature as a stable container of fictional characters and events or as an authentic reproduction of the actual world. The chapter also discusses how these apparently separate New Yorks are held together by links and connections, or what Hones calls "narrative wormholes" (60). Her detailed analysis of the images of dust, graffiti, and keyrings that connect different characters and events in the novel is one of the highlights of this chapter and exhibits her ability to read closely, which firmly supports the overall argument of this book.

The next two chapters build on the focus on the space in literature as something created and produced by narratives. The topic of links, connections, and networks also continues to be developed. Chapter five is very theoretical in nature. Here Hones contrasts two different conceptions of space. On the one hand, there is a view of space as a stable container, which,

according to her, is still prevalent among some narratologists; Peter Brooks's statement quoted above can be regarded as an example of such tendency. This position assumes that "locations are unambiguously positioned in geometric space," and that "literary setting can only be understood in terms of a static frame of real-world reference" (76). On the other hand, a more dynamic conception of space has been developed by spatial theorists like Marcus Doel, David Harvey, Henri Lefebvre, and Doreen Massey. In the works of these theorists, "space is understood not as the condition within which things happen and things are located but instead as the *result* of interaction between people and places, a relational dimension, always in progress" (76). Space ceases to be a stable foundation of human and non-human beings that live on it and of events that happen on it; rather, it is what emerges from various interactive relationships, a process that is perpetually in the midst of becoming. Hones of course sides with this position and emphasizes the importance of thinking about "the production of narrative space" in the event of the novel (77). Continuing this argument, the sixth chapter analyzes the thematic thread of physical and relational distance/proximity in *Let the Great World Spin*. Hones also employs actor-network theory in order to consider how interpersonal networks constitute McCann's textual space. Her reading of the novel's descriptions of the religious order, the postal network, and the community of bereaved mothers who have lost their sons in the Vietnam War is another brilliant demonstration of close reading as well as an attempt to flesh out the theoretical observations presented in the previous chapter.

In chapters seven and eight, Hones's analysis moves from the intratextual to the intertextual. McCann's novel is a highly allusive text full of explicit and implicit allusions to other texts. Although intertextuality is primarily an issue of the text, it is also about the participation of the reader in the production of textual space, since the reader's familiarity with other texts plays a crucial role in weaving this type of network. Hones therefore already steps into the realm of the extratextual as well. Chapter seven discusses the relationships between the novel and five other texts in terms of plot events and narrative style. These texts are Philippe Petit's *To Reach the Clouds* (2002) and four novels set in New York City: Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984), Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), and, most importantly, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925). While Petit's memoir is mentioned by McCann himself as one of his sources in the author's note attached to the current edition of the novel, the connections with the other four texts are what Hones, as a reader, makes during the process of her reading. The next chapter explores the issue of intertextuality further, particularly focusing on *The Great Gatsby*. As Hones displays, the connection between these two texts becomes most explicit in the chapter "A Fear of Love" in *Let the Great World Spin*. This chapter is narrated by a character named Lara, not by a disembodied narrative voice, after a fatal car crash that has killed two other principal characters; this narratological characteristic becomes important in Hones's reading. Observing how Lara weaves the texture of Fitzgerald's novel into her narration as well as her life, Hones says that "Lara is living in a third space made up of what is (for her) reality and what we must assume her familiarity, in that world, with Fitzgerald's novel" (123). Lara, after

the disastrous event, is consciously shaping her story and life according to the world of *The Great Gatsby*. Such mixture of reading and living, of fiction and reality, in fictional texts has been an important device in the novel as a genre since Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605, 1615). But Hones claims that Lara's simultaneous life in "literary and literal space" is significant in representing "the kind of reader for whom McCann's novel might indeed work as a 'doorstop to despair'": "This use of intertextual reference," she continues, "thus provides readers with a narrative model for a hopeful way of living not specific to a particular time and place but located in a literary space-time potentially accessible from almost anywhere, at any time" (125). Lara's story demonstrates how the act of reading can bring together writers, books, and readers separated by spatiotemporal distance. What *The Great Gatsby* does to Lara as a reader might also happen to the reader of *Let the Great World Spin*, making it possible for him or her to make a "doorstop to despair" out of this novel. In displaying the inseparable nature of reading, writing, and living, this is the most compelling and moving chapter in Hones's book.

Since she presents the network of these texts as her personal response, here I would like to add another thread to the web as my own personal response to Hones's and McCann's texts. In the chapter titled "Miró, Miró, on the Wall," McCann alludes to James Joyce's short story "The Dead" in *Dubliners* (1914). Narrated by a third-person narrative voice but from the perspective of Claire Soderberg, the language of this chapter is a mixture of multiple voices. Claire has lost her son in the Vietnam War, but his voice returns to her at some moments in her life: "*It rains on the living and the dead, Mama, only the dead have better umbrellas.*"⁴⁾ It is not clear whether Joshua's words come from Claire's memory or from her imagination, but they echo Joyce's well-known description of "the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead."⁵⁾ The return of the dead son's voice to the mother, or the mother's imaginary creation of the son's voice, links McCann's New York and Vietnam with Joyce's Dublin. Lara's chapter in McCann's novel seems to fortify this connection: while Lara's memory of "really loving the Nixon boy in the wheelchair" possibly derives from Gretta Conroy's memory of the dead Michael Furey in "The Dead," a preacher's statement that "things could be reconstituted and the dead could come alive, most especially in our hearts" also attests to the enduring presence of the past and the dead in the present.⁶⁾ More importantly, since most of the principal characters of the novel cross paths with one another after and as a result of the death of Corrigan and Jazzlyn at the end of the second chapter, the presence of the dead is one of the elements that hold the entire narrative together. The allusion to Joyce's story in Claire's chapter therefore not only forms a network of these two texts across time and space but also functions as another instance of what Hones calls "narrative wormholes."

The ninth and tenth chapters of *Literary Geographies* move from the intertextual to the

⁴⁾ Colum McCann, *Let the Great World Spin* (New York: Random House, 2009), 81.

⁵⁾ James Joyce, *Dubliners* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 225.

⁶⁾ McCann, *Let the Great World Spin*, 134, 149.

extratextual. Discussing the processes of creation, production, promotion, and reception of the novel, the argument covers still more extensive geographies. Hones reads the various spaces associated with McCann's practice of writing and pays attention to the persona that the novelist constructs as the author of *Let the Great World Spin* and other texts. Since this authorial persona partially overlaps with but is not the same as the man named Colum McCann, her argument is not a return to old-fashioned biographical criticism; the persona is also different from what narratologists have called the implied author, an entity that emerges as an effect of the literary text alone. Rather, it is another textual event that is "produced through text and by means of rhetoric, style, and reader response" (138). At the other end of the process of production and reception is the presence of readers, which is discussed in chapter ten. Hones first emphasizes how reception cannot be separated from promotion, investigating the industrial and economic aspects of literary production such as blurbs, book reviews, and virtual book tours. Then she considers new online literary spaces that function as sites of interaction between readers. Blog posts, tweets, online book groups, and reviews posted on online bookstores like Amazon.com are now important factors that shape the reader's experience of the text and thereby transform the text itself. Surveying various online reactions to McCann's novel, Hones demonstrates that the reader plays an active role in the event of the novel, and that the text continues to live its afterlife, as it were, in its interactive relationships with readers in the extratextual space surrounding it. Although these extratextual issues have been fields of inquiry in literary geography for a while, most literary critics do not usually deal with these problems. Reader-response criticism is not so popular among critics now as it used to be a few decades ago, and the works of literary criticism that cover the processes of production and promotion are certainly there but not many in number. Hones's exploration suggests many possible and challenging directions that spatially oriented criticism can take, challenging because these directions require a total rethinking and expansion of the concept of literary space. Some critics might feel dismayed by the idea of analyzing blogs, tweets, and nonprofessional online reviews seriously. Now that these virtual spaces are an important part of the experience of literature, however, they have to be considered as another geography of literature.

Exploring a wide range of topics that literary geography can deal with, *Literary Geographies* can be read as an attractive introduction to this interdisciplinary field. As one of the first book-length studies of McCann, it will also be an invaluable resource for the readers of his works. Despite the repeated claim that her reading of *Let the Great World Spin* is only a case study, Hones's close attention to the novel's language has a lot to teach to readers. Also, her discussion of theoretical issues—especially the conception of the novel as spatiotemporal event and of the space of literature as a dynamic process that is constantly in the state of becoming—cannot be separated from the novel's view of the world as something that never ends, something that continues to spin itself and spin new stories about itself. Reading and writing are open-ended processes that weave a network of interactive relationships across space and time. What to extract from the event of reading *Literary Geographies* or what to let happen after crossing paths with this book is, as Hones suggests at the end, up to us.